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## NOTES

### PRESIDENT GOMPERS AND THE LABOR VOTE

What is the real significance of Mr. Gompers' latest failure to "reward the friends and punish the enemies of labor?" Does it mean that in this country, as yet, working-class consciousness and its corollary class conflict do not exist; that in short there *is* no "*labor vote?*" Or does it indicate merely imperfect organization, tactical diversity and inefficient leadership of the "men of labor?" These questions of real import cannot be answered apart from careful analysis of the motives which governed Mr. Gompers in the inauguration and conduct of his recent campaign and of the forces inside the ranks of organized labor which thwarted his endeavors.

Just what motives impelled Mr. Gompers to enter the political arena cannot of course be stated with assurance by the mere observer. Rumor has it, indeed, that the veteran labor leader was at one time an ardent socialist and that his hidden aim has always been to draw the workers as rapidly as practicable in the direction of class-conscious political action. According to this view Mr. Gompers looked to the recent campaign not for any immediate positive benefits but for educational results that would lead in the future to a united independent labor party. There is much in the sequel that tends to corroborate this notion and still weight of evidence seems to point to a contrary conclusion. It indicates quite clearly that, whatever the nature of Mr. Gompers' secret wishes, the recent political movement was in fact a temporary, makeshift thing, forced upon the leaders of the federation by the imperative demand for a positive policy promising immediate results of a visible nature.

To support this view it is only necessary to indicate the essential nature of the trade unionism of today and to note briefly the events which immediately preceded the launching of Mr. Gompers' political-action campaign.

In spite of the great variety and incongruity of working-class aims and methods it is evident that the dominant motive of the average wage-worker must ever be to secure the greatest possible immediate pecuniary results from his toil. This motive governs his attitude toward unionism and molds its character. Thus

far he has found that these immediate results have been secured through unionism mainly by business methods—by successful bargaining with employers. Business unionism therefore has naturally come to be the dominant type. It has been found to be in fact “the only kind of unionism that works.” It is not surprising then that unionism as it exists has come to depend in the main for its hold upon the workers on approval of the stomach and the back; that it has as yet developed no grand philosophy of its own; that it does not in the main inspire the workers with hopes of a future in which opportunity and development figure chiefly; that, in short, it does not appeal to the imagination but, in the words of Mr. Gompers himself, stands for “more, more, more,” *more now*.

This being true it is evident that the success of unionism, as at present constituted, and the power of the leader, also, depends on ability consistently to “deliver the goods.” The moment immediate results fail disintegration begins, leadership is in jeopardy; the membership tends to become a desperate but distraught and ineffective crowd.

It was just this kind of situation in fact that confronted the American Federation of Labor toward the beginning of the campaign. The recent development of effective trust methods for dealing with organized labor; the growth of mutual aid among employers of the same industry in cases of labor disputes; the unemployment and tendency toward lower wages, occasioned by the panic; these forces united, had greatly reduced the power of the unions in the federation. Then came in rapid succession the court decisions which recorded the triumph of the militant employers and employers’ associations in their legal conflicts with organized labor. These decisions descended upon the Federation like a series of rapid and violent blows. To the leaders it appeared that suddenly their main weapons of offense and defense were about to be destroyed. To their perfervid imaginations even the legality of labor organization itself was in jeopardy. The rank and file stood distraught. Old methods had failed. If slowly acquired advances were not to be sacrificed; if disintegration were to be checked; if power were to be retained for the leaders, there was demanded of them at once something new, something extraordinary, something spectacular. Hence the abandonment of the long cherished anti-political tradition of the federation and the plunge into the *melé* of a national campaign.

The same imperative necessity of seeking immediate results seems to explain further, in the main, the specific political programme which Mr. Gompers attempted to force upon the Federation. Three lines of advance along the new way were possible: The Socialists could be supported; an independent labor party could be launched, or co-operation with one of the old political parties could be sought.

For the rejection of the first of these alternatives the socialists themselves were in part, no doubt, to blame. Within the Federation they have from the beginning persistently and consistently played the part of Job's friends. No action of those in authority has gone uncriticized; no opportunity has been lost to adorn a unionist failure with a socialist moral. These pin-pricking methods had created too bitter antagonisms to allow of immediate whole-hearted fusion. But these methods are themselves the reflection of the anti-thetical natures and methods of business unionism and socialism. The socialist dream of future felicity will not mate with the unionist demand for immediate results. From the Federation point of view, therefore, union with the forces of socialism promised no cure for the ills which beset Mr. Gompers and his followers. Nor obviously could any cure be sought in independent political action. Such action as surely as socialist fusion runs counter to the business-union ideal. Even could the dream of a united unionist vote for independent candidates be realized, what immediate results could be expected? At most these candidates could hope to poll not more than two or three million votes.

Plainly then, as seen by the business unionist, only the third alternative was available. Hence, under the tyranny of the struggle for immediate results, the presence of Gompers, *et al*, in the ante-chambers of the old political parties and the final call of "labor officialdom" upon the rank and file to "reward your friends and punish your enemies" by support of the Democratic party candidates.

The outcome of Mr. Gompers' effort thus to unite the labor vote was early foreseen by every close student of the labor movement. It was early evident that the bulk of the socialists would stand by their party candidates; that the non-federated unions would pursue their own political ways as usual, and that even the votes of the Federationists would be hopelessly scattered. Yet it was not and is not now an easy task to estimate exactly the forces inside the

ranks of organized labor that united to thwart Mr. Gompers' endeavors. Undoubtedly, however, the leading rôle was again played by the spirit of business unionism and by the conflict between this spirit and its socialistic antitype.

The carrying-out of Mr. Gompers' programme meant a step in the direction of the general pooling of unionist forces and issues. But business unionism operates at least directly against united working-class sympathy and action. Immediate results under business unionism are not best attainable for all workers but for particular groups. They are not attained by co-operation of all the unions, but by the creation, for particular unions and groups, of favorable bargaining conditions with *their* particular employers. In the struggle to secure these conditions, entangling alliances with weak unions are often a hindrance, and, when secured, their maintenance is easily jeopardized by the attempt to secure them for others.

More specifically, the strong unions which have definitely committed themselves to the spirit and programme of business unionism find their best hope for "more now" in offensive and defensive alliances with their employers regardless of others. Said an able business agent recently to the writer, "We endeavor to convince the employers that their interests and ours are identical. We show them that 10 per cent on a higher wage scale means more profit than on a lower one." Hence the well-known building-trades combinations and the recent love feast of the railway brotherhoods and their employers. In so far as unions are thus inspired and committed, "united labor" means nothing; class divisions are a myth; other unions and their members belong to the consumers who pay the bills.

Successful unions of this business type are not worrying about the "trust methods" and judicial decisions which are threatening the effectiveness of the majority of organizations in the Federation. Their withers are unwrung and they have found nothing in the teachings of Gompers which could induce them to give up their choice advantage in order to help him out of a dilemma. Nor is it merely the strong and successful unions which thus worshiped the "business" ideal to the detriment of Mr. Gompers' campaign. The weak ones who lift their eyes to the golden calf from afar failed for this reason to see the healing serpent which Gompers had raised aloft. In short, *the business union ideal proved here as elsewhere the bitter foe of united working-class action.*

This fact manifested itself during the campaign in many specific

and subtle ways. Notably it was thus seen in the opposition or indifference of some petty officials who in large cities make unionism and politics co-ordinate parts of a single profession. These officials stand equally close to the local powers that be, and to the sons of toil. They endear themselves to the latter by their peculiar power to secure immediate results. To the former, in exchange for personal graft, for influence in securing favorable public and private contracts, protection from police interference, etc., they promise that the boys shall vote right. It is not probable that such promises are ever fulfilled to any great extent. But the fact is that these labor leaders do manage to make good with the professional politicians and that they are not altogether repudiated by the workers, for to unionists who are thoroughly inoculated with the creed of business unionism, rights and ideals are apt to dwindle before the fact of immediate results, and so long as an officer gets these, they are not too prone to inquire closely into the quality of his methods or the nature of his demands. Gompers was quite powerless to influence these grafters and their gangs. They do well enough regardless of the general conditions which confront the organized worker as a whole. They did not propose to sacrifice their remunerative political connections in the interests of his dream. It would have been indeed a shocking violation of the creed of business unionism for them to have thus supported him.

But it was, after all, from the attitude and action of the rank and file, quite independent of general union policies and the influence of the politicians, that the most subtle and effective opposition came to Mr. Gompers' programme. Here curiously enough it suffered both as representing and as opposed to the spirit of business unionism.

It is a notable fact that though the average unionist may be thoroughly committed to business unionism, yet he is at times and, in a way, entirely class conscious. When in this mood he repudiates utterly the fundamental notion of business unionism, namely, that harmony of interests exists between the employer and the worker and between the middle and the working classes. This latent class consciousness is roused especially when members of the working class appear to attempt a middle-class pose. On this account the average worker tends to resent the appearance of a fellow-worker, or of a man intimately identified with unionism, as a candidate on

a middle-class platform.<sup>1</sup> He tends also to resent any attempt openly to commit unionism as such to the support of a middle-class party. This resentment no doubt lost to Mr. Bryan and his Democratic fellows many unionist votes though it is doubtful if those votes swelled to any degree the socialist total.

It is this latent class spirit which gives such extraordinary negative power to the socialist minority in the unions, and from work of this minority the plans of Mr. Gompers severely suffered. The socialists in the ranks—patient, able, uncompromising, eternally agitating, quick to point out every weakness and dwell upon every failure—played constantly upon this tendency to class feeling latent among the business unionists. The measure of their effectiveness in the campaign is to be found in the bitterness of the attack which Mr. Gompers made upon Debs.

In spite of all this, however, it is probably true that Mr. Gompers' programme was most generally repudiated by the rank and file because it did not square with the chief canon of business unionism. The average worker may believe what he will but in action he is to an extent the slave of the need for immediate results. To him, with his dependent family, and with no provision but his prospective

<sup>1</sup> My attention was called to this fact at the time of Mr. Mitchell's refusal to accept, if tendered, the democratic nomination for governorship of Illinois. "Why," I asked a unionist of considerable note, "should Mitchell thrust aside a nomination which, through a union of the labor and democratic votes would seem to promise election?" "Because he knows well enough that he would be beaten," was the reply. "Watch the coming primary elections in Chicago and see for yourself that the labor knife is out for the worker who sets up as a middle-class candidate for office."

The outcome of the Chicago primaries seemed indeed to sustain this assertion. Before these primary elections the Chicago Federation of Labor formally indorsed those candidates for nomination on both the Republican and Democratic tickets who after careful examination by a committee were pronounced to be bona fide laborers or the friends of labor. Of the candidates thus indorsed only about 30 per cent. were nominated. Most members of this successful minority had affiliations aside from those with the workers and would probably have been nominated without labor's indorsement. In certain cases the returns clearly indicated the knifing of labor candidates by labor voters. One locally well-known Democrat, for example, who on account of great services and sacrifices for labor, has become especially identified with unionism, and who was not only indorsed unequivocally by the Chicago Federation of Labor, but also by strong unions independently, was beaten by every other candidate for the nomination he sought. His total vote in fact was less than the reputed voting strength of one single union whose indorsement he had received.

wage, the dominant issue was bound to be: whose election will best assure work and pay now and in the immediate future.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the operation of the business-union motive, in its various aspects, and the conflict between this and the socialist ideal alone cost Mr. Gompers a united labor vote. Mere political traditions, inertia, and downright obstinacy played at least minor rôles as disrupting forces.

It is well known that a strong anti-political tradition has grown up with unionism generally. Partly this tradition is the outcome of bitter experience. The predecessors and rivals of the American Federation of Labor in general suffered severely from dabbling in politics. Moreover, political discussion within the unions has always, as a rule, proved to be a source of weakness and disruption. For these reasons Mr. Gompers and other old-time leaders have preached such a crusade against political action that in the minds of many of the workers the separation of unionism and politics has become as thoroughly canonized as the separation of church and state. But the average unionist holds tenaciously to traditions. He, like the rest of us, is naturally unreflective; his canons are absolute. He knows that unionism is in distress but he does not yet realize clearly that a new situation requiring radically new methods, has arisen.

Though the average unionist, however, clings to the anti-political rule as far as the union is concerned, he by no means applies this rule to himself. In fact the individual political convictions of the rank and file formed a stumbling-block which Gompers seemed utterly unable to kick out of his path. Theoretically, the average unionist is still under the domination of the middle-class traditions of natural, God-given rights. He is therefore still swayed by middle-class newspapers and orators. Under the combined influence of these forces and of Mr. Gompers' past teaching he has taken as his basic political creed the notion that a man has a right and a duty to vote as he pleases. Nothing, therefore, more thoroughly rouses his indignation and a certain pigheaded obstinacy than the suggestion that someone in authority is trying to deliver his vote. The enemies of Gompers used this fact most effectively in the campaign and it was for this reason that he found it necessary so often and so strenuously to deny any political authority and to cast his attempt to unite the labor vote into the form of a pathetic and impotent appeal.

But the same forces that have rendered the average unionist politically independent in principle, have tended to make him a par-

tisan in fact. Determined to maintain his independence against all attack and persuasion he has often braced himself with concrete political attachments of a very positive nature. The attachments thus acquired are like a religion in the blind tenacity with which he holds to them and in the doggedness with which he refuses to recognize any contradiction between them and the ordinary interests of life. Like the ordinary person's religion and science or religion and business he tends to keep his politics and his every-day affairs in separate thought-tight compartments. In a way, therefore, it may be true, as one of the ablest local unionists has said: "Gompers' political difficulties were due not to the fact that unionists have been in politics too little but that they have been in politics too ——— much." But it is evident that in the fate of Mr. Gompers' scheme the truth or falsity of this position counted for little. Unionists seemed to find his plans lacking in some great essential of merit.

This analysis of the motives and the conditions which forced Mr. Gompers into the campaign, and which finally thwarted his endeavors, seems to point unequivocally to one general conclusion: *There is in America today no "labor vote."* The wage-workers of this country apparently cannot yet be relied upon to rally solidly to the support of any single working-class leader or working-class programme. Indeed, the evidence seems to show that no formidable proportion of the workers can be relied upon even to support working-class as against middle-class policies and leaders. So far as this outcome seems due to tradition, intellectual inertia, the assumption of natural individual rights, and the selfish hugging of special advantage, it points of course unequivocally to the conclusion that in this country real class consciousness and class conflict are absent. Yet does the foregoing analysis warrant the assumption that non-existence of a labor vote really establishes such a conclusion? Does it not rather indicate among the workers, as earlier suggested, diversity of tactics, lack of organization and of efficient leadership? Does it not above all, however, indicate that the average worker is compelled by the imperative need for immediate results to forego the expression through the ballot of what may be his real class conscious feeling? If so it emphasizes most the tremendous counter force set up by the very economic conditions that breed classes and class conflict.

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